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MUSIC REVIEWS

3-D PICNIC
New Wave Party (Cargo)

The massacre of schlocky cover songs was a time-honored tradition in rock & roll long before the Replacements were murdering "Hitchin' a Ride." You might say it began with the Beatles' endless sets in Hamburg, slaying "Besame Mucho" or whatever they were doing to kill time, but it's a sure-fire way to break up a crowd. Laughter is still the best medicine.

In musical comedy, there are two ways to get big laffs. The first is the lyrical parody, the kind that "Weird" Al Yankovic has been riding all the way to his first million, which is to satirize a song by creating new lyrics over a familiar melody. The other is genre parody, recasting a familiar song into a new musical form, like Dread Zeppelin with their reggae ruination of Page 'n' Plant, or Killdozer deconstructing Neil Diamond. Genre parody usually isn't as funny, because the audience has to know the original instead of just cracking up at the lyrical jokes, which are accessible to anyone.

Local clowns 3-D Picnic have chosen the latter route on their new EP, *New Wave Party*. The title itself says it all. If ever there was a deserving target, new wave was it, with its fashion code of skinny ties, porkpie hats and polka-dotted shoes. Not to mention the generally lightweight music itself, which 3-D Picnic stomps all over with a deranged vengeance.

But is it funny? The band opens the record with Claude Bessy's famous declaration ("zere isss no such zing as new wave") and proceeds to stampede through a slew of post-punk classics. It hits the bull's eye only about half the time, as its covers of the B-52's "Strobe Light" and Tears for Fears' "Head Over Heels" are only revved-up remakes of the originals. Where it does succeed is in the hilarious destruction of the Police's "Message in a Bottle," done as full-on dementia, complete with vintage James Chance/Arto Lindsay chord changes and singer Don Burnet's quasi-Sting whine — the band pisses all over the King of Pompous Pain's silly anthem. The ridiculous medley of X and Erasure songs with "Theme From *Hogan's Heroes*" comes a close second.

Unlike most comedy records, this one bears repeated listening. 3-D Picnic crunch with a lot more fury on this joke EP than they did on their last two records. Which says something about the power of having a real good time. (Johnny Angel)

SOCIAL DISTORTION
Somewhere Between Heaven and Hell (Epic)

Social Distortion have made it through the decline and fall of L.A.'s punk scene, as well as through numerous breakups and drug addictions and a sober, successful comeback. After all that, if they fucked up now, it would seem a damn shame. *Somewhere Between Heaven and Hell* is Social D's second album on Epic and their third since the West Coast punk classic *Mommy's Little Monster* (1982). Like their last, *Social Distortion*, this album stays true to their raw, discordant past while bringing out a little more of their passion for traditional rock & roll.

Aside from a slight country drawl, singer Mike Ness' voice remains perfectly unaffected, grinding away, but now through more rockabilly, stripped-down country & western and freewheeling jams. It's a sound where pomade and bondage belts meet to make incredibly cool songs. A slippery buzz-saw guitar (remember the beginning of "Mommy's Little Monster"?) ignites "When She Begins," a tumble of solos and pumped-up rockabilly beats.

Ness' blunt lyrics only sometimes bother to rhyme — the melodic "Sometimes I Do," Social D's abrasive answer to "Love Is a Rose," is a good example. Ness slurs like Shane MacGowan jacked on a couple cups of coffee: "Sometimes I'm rich and sometimes I'm poor/But it doesn't really matter when you're dead on the floor." The down-and-out ballad ends and the weepy guitar speeds to a gallop with "Bye Bye Baby," an abrasive kiss-off, a throwback to SD's early obnoxious days.

With each new Social Distortion album, Mike Ness confirms that he has more than a couple of good songs and some tattoos up his sleeves. But *Heaven and Hell* takes the band's turbulent story a step further, wearing their gritty past as comfortably as an old leather jacket. To be continued. (Lorraine Ali)

Rhythming

Bill Laswell's beat poetry BY LYNELL GEORGE

BAHIA BLACK
Ritual Beating System (Axiom/Island)

Once again producer Bill Laswell provides the formula for an alluring mastermix: a loosely defined, compelling concept; top-shelf musicians (Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Bernie Worrell, Henry Threadgill, Carlinhos Brown and the 10-piece drum ensemble Olodum); and lots of room. It would be hard to outdo the last ambitious venture, Material's *Seven Souls*, where Laswell contracted a dispassionate William S. Burroughs to croak out his prose over shimmering Moroccan bells, strings and a wash of evocative technonoise.

This time, Laswell, a tenured bassist himself, sits out the set to orchestrate an exploration of the incantatory possibilities of rhythm. Percussionists hold the spotlight, channeling worlds in trance-like fashion. *Ritual Beating System*'s authority and scope surprises. The sweet and drifting melody "Retrato Calado," over which vocalist Carlinhos Brown whispers Nascimento/Veloso/Lins fashion, seems familiar if not altogether derivative. But this lead cut doesn't accurately foretell what then unfolds. "Capitão Do Asfalto" instantly transforms Brown into a belligerent MC, bustin' hard rhymes in lyric Portuguese, his voice formidable percussion itself.

By the time "The Seven Powers" cues up, it's apparent that there's no use making predictions — never mind labels. Herbie Hancock strides in boldly on acoustic piano — no tricks, bare-fisted — to compete with wall-of-sound drums bent on some fancy formation marching. It's Shorter who slowly smoothes these sharp edges with a gauzy soprano saxophone.

Antonio Luis Alves de Souza leads Olodum. They knock from mood to mood with steely deliberation, piling up dense layers of rhythmic texture. These sinister drums become specters, the eponymous cut a natural pause of approaching gloom and doom, rising and falling on a crest of congas, timbales, metals and whatever else will make a declarative statement. "Guia Pro Congal" creates a friendlier, more optimistic mood, with Bernie Worrell on the mighty Hammond B-3 organ endowing it a nostalgic, unexpected R&B tinge.

By far the most complex composition, "Gwagwa O De" pits Hancock's crazy, canting piano against Shorter's screeching soprano. Odolum imbues the atmosphere with ambient unease, palms and sticks beating out distorted visions.

Ritual Beating System extends the possibilities of percussion — metal, wood and skin collide in a semblance of melody; pace and force swiftly alter moods. Melding street rhythms, funk, world beat and rap (even Locke High's strutting marching band could learn a thing or two from Tony Walls' polyrhythmic "Follow Me"), Bahia Black is an impressive percussive convergence that proves talking drums can speak for themselves.

PERFORMANCE

L.A. PHILHARMONIC
at Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, February 6

One day, the Los Angeles Philharmonic will live up to some — maybe even all — of the glowing hype surrounding Esa-Pekka Salonen, its conductor-designate. Last Thursday's concert, the first of four programs allotted to him this season, was also a fair demonstration of the distance the orchestra still has to travel.

It was, to be blunt, as misguided a concert as the local forces have put on in quite some time. It began badly, with Steven Stucky's lurid rewrite of Henry Purcell's *Funeral Music for Queen Mary*, scored for a full contingent of modern brass, winds and percussion and reharmonized so that Purcell's own extraordinary vocabulary of dissonance became distended into a wash of modish abrasiveness. Worse, it was sent skyward by Salonen in the spirit of a John Williams movie tag. At the end came Salonen's perverse misrepresentation of Mahler's Fourth Symphony, the composer's own tempo flexibilities so exaggerated as to lose all sense of melodic line, a self-indulgent distortion in which Salonen's willfulness replaced Mahler's own fantasy.

In between, there was the fragile, elegant delight of Benjamin Britten's *Les Illuminations*, with the estimable soprano Barbara Hendricks illuminating the whimsies of Rimbaud's verses, beautiful in tone but sung in some language only sporadically recognizable as French. Hendricks was also on hand for the song in the last movement of the Mahler, but in some language only sporadically recognizable as German. Perhaps the Philharmonic's new stage risers, inaugurated at this concert, create new balance problems; for whatever reason, it was only the sound of Hendricks that came through, not the sense.

The orchestra played not only poorly but lazily as well. A cellist friend pointed out with some horror that several musicians had ignored Mahler's specifications for mutes here, or *col legno* playing there. Yet the orchestra was scheduled to record the work this past week. If our new conductor, for all the glamour he projects on the podium — photo Finnish, did I hear someone say? — cannot hear what needs correcting in his orchestra-to-be, we are in some kind of trouble. (Boethius)

CYPRESS HILL, 2ND II NONE
at the Country Club, February 7

Because rap is wholly created in the studio, rap shows suffer without the interaction of a live band. The turntable scratches are basically ornamental nowadays, and no matter how many wriggling go-go dancers or cheap tricks they trot out onstage, all that you get is, basically, a souped-up drag act.

But maybe I'm missing the point. Perhaps people keep shelling out the bucks (this was a sellout) more for the party than for the artist. At this show, I'll bet that a good portion of the audience came down because of the way this event was hyped. Everybody was nervous, and expectations of some kind of stupid violence ran high. But despite the extremely tight security and the supposed gang affiliations of the acts, things went off fairly smoothly.

Compton's teenage rappers 2nd II None, from DJ Quik's growing stable, seemed to understand their role. Skipping around on the stage, bouncing off of each other and mugging like crazy, they made the cavernous Country Club seem like a house party. They were tight. The set whizzed by with the audience dancing and chanting the words, and the young girls screamed like bobbysoxers when the jheri-curled Quik pranced out and rapped along with his protégés. 2nd II None may claim to be Bloods, but their brand of poppy gangster-lite was harmless entertainment, more like chitlin-circuit comedians Skillet and Leroy than Sacco and Vanzetti.

After an interminable impromptu appearance by an obviously blunted Mellow Man Ace (brother of Cypress' Sen-Dog), Cypress Hill finally went on. Cypress, who released one of the best rap albums of last year, full of insightful yarns about teenage rage and endless dope smoking, seemed lost onstage. It's hard to be sloppy when all you have to do is blast your tape and rap, but they managed it. They *were* dealing with a horrible sound system (Dog's vocals were inaudible, while leader B-Real's were overblown) and overanxious bouncers, but after about four tunes they disappeared — without explanation.

There were scattered shouts for them to come back, but nobody seemed really to care. It was as if the audience *expected* the thing to blow. After a few minutes, the lights went on and everybody politely filed out. They must have had enough. (Jac Zinder)

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